

The Hardening of Israel

Romans 11:25

by Ernest O'Neill

Today we are studying a verse that requires us to look back on that miserable experience in February. It is good to be as honest as you can be about experiences that you pass through, even though they are unpleasant. So if we look back at the anti-Semitic misunderstanding we faced in February, maybe it is possible to see a little more clearly where all the hue and cry came from.

I think that the first group that it came from is important, because they are of the household of faith. They are those dear Christians who once put Jesus first in their lives, but now have put a cause first in their lives. You could almost call them Gentile proselytizers, because they regard the Jewish nation not just as God's chosen people, but in a way, as God's darlings. They feel that the Jewish nation is going to return enmasse, which is; everyone in the Jewish nation is going to return miraculously to Jesus when he comes and not one of them is going to be lost.

They do not see that that time has not arrived, and even their interpretation is questionable, as we will see next Sunday. But even if that were right, that time has not yet arrived; these loved ones treat the situation as if it has -- they misread the times. They think that this is harvest time, instead of only springtime, in God's dealings with the Jewish nation. They believe that the Jewish nation is about to turn to Jesus and they want either to be in Jerusalem at that time or they want to be preparing the Jews for that time. So anything in the Bible that seems to speak against the Jewish nation and suggests that they are not pleasing to God at the moment, these loved ones have to deny. Anything that disagrees with their idea that the Jewish nation is just about to turn enmasse to Jesus, they regard as anti-Semitic.

They do it with a good heart, but actually their interpretations are anachronisms; they are misreading the times. As we will see next Sunday, there will never be a time when the whole Jewish nation turns miraculously to Jesus. There is only one basis for coming to God, and that is faith in Jesus, even for the Jewish nation. Those dear ones were some of the people who led the hue and cry, because they themselves are at the moment more committed to the salvation of the Jewish nation than they are to Jesus as Savior. That is tragic: if they keep on putting a cause before Christ they will end up in the same chaos as every other sect that does that. So that was one group, and we need to pray for them because they form a substantial part of evangelical Christianity.

Now another group was the jealous Gentiles -- the dear souls on campus that were just jealous of any blessing that God gives to people who believe in the authority of his word. Those loved ones will tend to use any minorities to undermine other groups. This year they are pro-Jew, next year they will be pro-Palestinian and they formed some force in the whole experience that we had.

It seems too, that you have to note the hungry journalists, because the dear souls are so hungry to sell newspapers that they will take any view and exaggerate it into an extremist view in order to start a fight -- because that is the way you sell newspapers. We would have to face that the media, though often responsible, often is very provincially-minded and instead of aiding communication, rather, stimulates miscommunication.

In a way the most important group is the next group -- the Jewish community itself. To be truthful, they were "johnny-come-latelys" in the whole episode. In fact I think they didn't want much to do

with it and weren't terribly roused by it all until they were dragged into it by the Gentiles who wanted a little support. Yet in a way, the Jews are the most important group because they are the people for whom this eleventh chapter of Romans was written. It is because of our love for them that we attempt to expound that chapter.

So let's look at the Jews who responded to the hue and cry. First of all, there are the secular Jews: they form the majority of the Jewish community in the world today. They are as open to Jesus as we are ourselves. They regard their Jewishness in the same way as we regard our Swedish-ness or our Irish-ness—it is a nationalistic characteristic. They themselves are non-religious and get nothing out of what religion they knew. They are secular Jews and they form the majority of the Jewish community in the world. They are the people that certain other Jews want to protect from the Gospel.

I remember meeting one of them as I was going out of the Lincoln Del. This gentleman said to me "How could I get a copy of that Sunday sermon on the divinity of Jesus? That was the clearest thing I ever heard about Jesus. He must have been the greatest Jew that ever lived." So I explained to him how to do it. That is probably the majority of the Jewish nation, and we have to see that they are just as bewildered about the anti-Semitism thing as we are,

Now a second group is almost as large: they are the nationalistic Jews; people like Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir -- not religious Jews at all -- but Jews who believe that the Jewish nation should have a homeland and should fight and do everything possible to obtain it. They are concerned just with that. They don't feel tremendously antagonistic to Jesus or to Christians; they are just secular, nationalistic Jews who believe that the Jewish nation should have a homeland. They do note the experiences of the Second World War, and so they are naturally and justifiably paranoid. I don't think you or I could blame them. Some of us have experienced meeting some of those loved ones. They just get scared, when anybody yells "anti-Semitic". They don't feel hatred for us, but when somebody calls me anti-Semitic, they watch me on television and they just can't believe that I'm not. They are simply paranoid. You have to love and be kind and gracious to them.

Then we come to the third group. They are the problems, and yet they are the minority. They are the Zionists who espouse Prime Minister Begin's viewpoint in various degrees and ways. They may not go all the way with him on Jerusalem as the capital city, they may not go all the way with him on the settlements; but they do believe that the Bible declares that the original borders of David's kingdom, if not even more than that, are a God-given right to the Jewish people. I don't know that we differ too much from that: the original plan and vision that they have is probably the same as we have, except that we believe that it will be established by God's power through the return of Christ. They don't believe in Christ as the Messiah, and so they believe that they have to bring this about by their own power. Now they are the loved ones that link with the first group of Gentile proselytizers: they either misread the time, or want to bring about God's will by their own power, and so they link together and one makes use of the other. That is the dangerous situation in which we, as a nation find ourselves. And that explains some of the great powers that move when you get a gospel that suggests that the Jewish nation might not be pleasing to God at the moment. Because if you once let that kind of gospel go, then it might affect the source of your money and your political power.

Loved ones that is the background: the last group, the Zionists, that want to bring about the original borders of Israel with their own power rather than by the return of Jesus the Messiah, is the group that Paul is talking about in this verse that we are studying today. So will you look at

the verse with me, and let's interpret it and then see what God is saying to us, ourselves, because that is primarily why we are here. Romans 11:25: "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in." Paul says, "Lest you think you are superior because you know the truth about Jesus and have accepted that truth, I want you to understand a truth that is hidden from everybody but those who submit their consciences and their lives and their wills to Jesus." It is not a mystery such as you have in eastern religion that is there to make other people feel inferior; a mystery in the New Testament is some truth that is only revealed to those who have their wills submitted to God. Paul says, "I want you to understand this truth regarding the day Jews and Gentiles are going to come together in Jesus."

A hardening (and the Greek word means "a petrification, a petrifying") has come upon part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles come in. The reason loved ones from the press, or fanatical Jews, come in here among us and don't understand what we are about or appear to be crude and cruel, is that it is a mystery that we are involved in -- a mystery that is revealed only to those who submit their wills to Jesus. If you come into this meeting and your will is not submitted to Jesus, you can't see certain things. To them it is a kind of mumbo-jumbo. To them it is just bewildering; they think we are all dumb. It is important for us all to see that.

Then it is important to see that there are many Jews who have submitted their wills to Jesus. There are many loved ones in the Messianic congregations here in the Twin Cities who are praying for us and loving us. They have submitted their wills to Jesus just as many other Jews down through the centuries have, like Peter and Paul and what were they but Jews? Anna and Simeon -- did you remember when Jesus was brought as a little baby to the temple -- so there are many Jews who have submitted their wills to the Spirit of Christ and have accepted him and that's why Paul says a hardening has come upon a part of Israel. It is "apo merous" to Israel in the Greek; it means "upon part of Israel," not upon all of Israel. That ties up with other things that Paul said in regard to the remnant of Israel.

Look at Romans 11:5: "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." There is a remnant of the Jewish nation that is accepting Jesus. Verse 7: "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened." It is important to see that it is upon part of the Jewish nation that this hardening has come; it is the hardening that was forecast by the Jewish prophets themselves. Look at Romans 11:8: "As it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day.'" Isaiah, a Jewish prophet, said that. There is a hardening that has come upon part of the Israeli people, and it has come down to this very day.

It is the same hardening that Jesus pointed out in John 8:39: "They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do what your father did.' They said to him, 'We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.'"

That is what a "hardening" means, loved ones. It is not saying all Jews think that about Jesus, but that part of the Jewish nation thinks that way about Jesus. That is what Jesus himself found when he came: he found that when he presented the truth to them, they refused it -- even though they knew it was the truth. That is what a hardening is. The Greek word is "porosis" and it means a petrification or a petrifying.

Petros is "stone" in Greek, and it means that the heart becomes hard like a stone: the whole personality becomes hard: it loses sensation and the ability to react to things and to people. It becomes unaware of the effects of even its own action -- it becomes a machine. The whole personality becomes insensitive to the effects of its own actions. It becomes un-empathetic un-sympathetic to other people. A hardening takes place so that you don't even know what you are doing. A hardening has come upon part of the Jewish nation so that they have lost sensitivity to others; they have lost sensitivity even to themselves, and they have lost sensitivity, most of all, to the truth of Jesus. It is a hardening and a petrifying of all the arteries of the spirit.

Loved ones that is what Jesus was pointing to, strongly, in John 8:22-24. He is speaking to the Jews who came to him: verse 22: "Then said the Jews 'Will he kill himself, since he says, "Where I am going, you cannot come'?" "He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.'" In other words, the hardening that has come upon part of Israel will remain there until all the Gentiles who are going to believe in Jesus have believed. But during that time many Jews will die in that hardening. There are many loved ones in the Jewish nation who will die in their sins while this hardening remains among the nation.

The hardening is a judicial hardening: it is the hardening process that God built into our conscience and our will and mind and emotions and spirit that takes place after we have hardened our own wills against him. You see it in God's dealing with Pharaoh in Exodus 9:34: "But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again, and hardened his heart, he and his servants." He hardened his own heart -- he hardened his own will against God. "So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go; as the Lord had spoken through Moses. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go into Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them.'"

Loved ones, there does come a time after we -- Jew or Gentile -- have hardened our wills against God's wills when he allows a hardening process to begin to take place in us. That is a judicial hardening and that is what produces the hatred and the hostility. It is important to see that all the dear old saints down through the years, Luther and the early church fathers, were all charged with anti-Semitism at some point in their preaching because they did see this teaching in the New Testament -- that because the Jews are God's special people, God deals especially hard with them and there is a hardening that has come upon them. Here are Luther's comments on this verse. It is startling! Of course this is why God used these dear men and blessed them: they were not afraid while so many of us are mealy-mouthed and anxious to please.

"A Jewish heart is so stock, stone, iron-devil hard that it is in no way moved. But if there is still something that is human in them, for him this letter to the Romans may be of benefit and profit." Now, rather than saying immediately that Luther is a fool -- remember that Luther is the man that God used to bless many of us here in this body. Luther is the man that God used to free great numbers of people from all kinds of bondage. First you have to say, "What is he trying to get

at?" Obviously he is saying that when a judicial hardening sets in upon people's lives, it is virtually impossible to bring them to repentance, but if they can be turned at all, it is these truths in Romans that will do it.

The purpose of it all is for you and me to see that that is what takes place in us. If you say to me "What triggered this judicial hardening?" It is clear and you can see it in Jesus' words in John 8:43-45: "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me." Jesus says, "You know this is the truth and you are rejecting it." That is what brings judicial hardening. That is what God spoke to me about in this: when you or I knowingly reject our conscience; when we knowingly harden our wills against our consciences, we trigger a hardening process that God has built into our personality. Our wills are made to obey our consciences immediately. Happiness is a will obeying a conscience immediately without allowing any rationalizing of the mind or the emotions or the body to interrupt. When a will obeys the conscience immediately, it triggers a softening process that makes your spirit sensitive to God's voice and fills you with love for others.

But when your will knowingly, deliberately, consciously rejects what your conscience is saying to it, you trigger a judicial hardening process that begins to make you insensitive; it brings blindness to your spiritual eyes and deafness to your spiritual ears. That "porosis" -- that hardening -- takes place in any of us; not just the Jewish nation; it takes place in any of us who deliberately reject what we know our conscience is saying to us, or what God is saying to us.

So would you think about it yourselves? We are not here to do anything but love the ones who are Jews and who have that responsibility in their hearts and lives. We are, most of all, here to be responsible to God for ourselves. Loved ones, are there any signs of judicial hardening taking place inside you? Is there any lack of sensitivity developing in you to other people or to God or to areas of your life? Is there any way in which you are losing spiritual sensation, the ability to feel spiritually? Is there any way in which you think a hardening has come on the arteries of your own spirit? Then look for any conscious, knowing, rejection of truth that may be in your life. The Bible says, "Break up any fallow ground." The way to break it up is to face whatever rejection there may be in you of God's will for your life. Face it, repent, and turn from it. Admit to God, "Lord, I've been rationalizing this thing: I've been pretending that this was not you; that this was just my own conscience. Lord, I know, and admit, and acknowledge, that this is your voice to me and I am going to walk according to it."

Then, loved ones, in regard to our Jewish brothers and sisters, let us pray for them and see that the great majority of them are like ourselves -- they are not fanatical Irishmen trying to fight for their own lands or fanatical religious people. Most of them are just like us and open to the reasonableness and probability that Jesus is the Messiah. What God most wants for us is a heart that is filled with love towards them and that can only come when our own heart is soft if we are walking in the light. "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." I John: 7

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for your word that steers us through all the doubts that assail us in this

journey through life. We thank you for this verse – however hard it is. “I don’t want you to be wise in your own conceits: I want you to understand this mystery that a hardening has come upon a part of Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in.” Lord, we would pray for our brothers and sisters in the Jewish Nations. And we would be honest ourselves that not only they, but we too, can experience a judicial hardening that comes originally from your plan and your creation if we harden our own wills against you. Oh Lord, we want to be soft and sensitive people; we want to have hearts of flesh and not hearts of stone. We want our friends and our loved ones and our colleagues to find a gentle and kindly spirit in us that comes because we walk according to your own will in our lives. Lord, we know we can’t create that, we can’t invent it; it just seems like “sweetie-sweetness” when we “put it on”. You alone, Lord, can bring the love and the kindness that is from your own heart. And you can only bring it where a will submits continuously to the conscience. Lord, we would do that; we would walk in the light this day. Father, any of us who have turned from you or rationalized in any way – we forsake all that now. We sense the hardening of the arteries already, in us -- we sense ourselves getting old in our spirit; Lord, we turn from that now. We turn to you, Lord Jesus, and commit ourselves to walking according to your will – whatever the cost – so that you may soften our hearts and revive us again.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. Amen.